

# Burlington Free Press

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A LOCAL CUSTOM

## Wilderness: Our future

By Carl Reidel

April 23, 2006

A few weeks ago an ancient oak on the shore of Lake Champlain collapsed in a strong wind. Already a stately tree when the French explorer Samuel de Champlain came to the lake in 1609, it had a broad crown above a trunk nearly 20 feet around when it fell.

History passed by this venerable tree for centuries ... generations of Iroquois and Algonquin people, English and French armadas, American presidents, heroes and rogues; birch canoes, sailing ships and steamboats. No one saw it fall.

This tree, and a few others remaining nearby, are the last remnant of the magnificent landscape that enraptured Champlain -- a land of "fine trees... snow-capped mountains... an abundance of fowl, stags, deer, bears, and beaver." Here was a forest beyond our imaginations -- a wilderness that would fuel a vast new commercial empire.

By the mid-1800s most of the grand Vermont forest was gone, soil erosion clogged rivers, and most fish and wildlife were nearly extinct. The expansive wilderness which Champlain encountered had been replaced by cultivated landscapes.

Vermont and New York are planning a celebration of the 400th anniversary of Champlain's "discovery" of the lake he named for himself. On past anniversaries we built a memorial bridge and lighthouse, and held picnics where Presidents spoke. Like many such celebrations, little of significance remained after the party. This time we are capable of creating a living memorial.

Within a few days of the fall of the ancient oak on Lake Champlain, Vermont's congressional delegation introduced legislation to establish 48,000 acres of new wilderness areas in the Green Mountain National Forest, whose snow-capped mountain summits inspired Champlain centuries ago.

Sen. Patrick Leahy described the legislation as "a vision for the Green Mountain Forest for this and future generations." He echoed the words of President Reagan who signed the Vermont Wilderness Act of 1984: "No task facing us is more important than preserving the American Land ... Generations hence, parents will take their children to these woods to show them how the land must have looked to the first Pilgrims and pioneers."

The new wilderness designations proposed by Senators Jim Jeffords and Patrick Leahy and Rep. Bernie Sanders are a fitting memorial for the 400th anniversary of Champlain's arrival, a permanent reminder that the American character is rooted in the wilderness experience.

This is not an easy undertaking. Some special interest groups object to new wilderness designations that will constrain their private use of these public lands. They claim that increased wilderness reserves will hurt us who hunt and fish, or earn our living in the woods.

That is simply untrue. After creation of the new areas, less than 2 percent of Vermont's land will be reserved, little capable of commercial wood production. Claims that wildlife will suffer are also untrue.

Champlain reported "abundant" wildlife long before land-clearing and commercial logging began. The proposed wilderness designations, as Leahy stated, are about "a vision... for this and future generations" -- a vision worthy of our best efforts and American values.

These new designations, however, fall a bit short of a truly grand vision. To accommodate some of the special interests, the legislation inappropriately leaves out key lands in Glastenbury, on Lye Brook and Lamb Brook, and elsewhere -- omissions that need to be addressed in the final bill.

We must remember that this is not just a contest over private claims to public lands, be it for logging or ATVs or tree-huggers. Nor is it only about a short-term forest plan or designated wilderness reserves. This is about a matter of far greater significance. It is a vision of restoring and sustaining the American Spirit; it is about our common heritage and a living legacy for those yet unborn.

Carl Reidel of Ferrisburgh is a past president of the American Forestry Association and former District Forest Ranger with the United States Forest Service.

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### Harmful insects in your woods

By Norman Arseneault

April 23, 2006

The annual meeting of the Vermont Woodlands Association, representing 400 woodland owners, families, and individuals, took place one day after Vermont's congressional delegation announced their bill proposing new federally designated wildernesses on the Green Mountain National Forest.

As various speakers took the podium, I was struck by the startling and discomfortingly contradictory messages.

Steve Sinclair, Vermont State Forester, opened with an informative talk covering the latest threats to forest lands from a relatively new exotic insect known as the Emerald Ash Borer. Though not yet found in Vermont, the borer is an extremely dangerous threat to all species of ash trees.

Due to an aggressive strategy of containment adopted by federal and state authorities, this Asian insect has been confined to portions of Indiana, Ohio and Michigan where it has killed more than 12 million to 15 million ash trees, according to Tree Farmer Magazine. Potential losses to shade trees, urban ornamental plantings, and standing timber resources are considered so great that unheard-of control measures are under way. Upon discovery of an infected site, all ash trees within a radius of a half mile are cut, and burned or ground up. These drastic measures are occurring in cities, suburbs and forests with use of eminent domain-like powers to insure 100 percent compliance.

It is easy to imagine the anguish of homeowners and forest landowners when all ash trees on their property must be destroyed.

Vermont officials have not been sitting idly by. Ash species are common here and are important

in the economy, diversity and beauty of forest lands cared for by VWA (Vermont Woodlands Association) members. A strategy is in place to closely monitor the most likely entry points for the borer in Vermont. If the insect is found, aggressive treatment is warranted. But not in congressionally-designated wildernesses in the Green Mountain National Forest.

Gina Owens, acting forest supervisor for the U.S. Forest Service, followed the emerald ash borer discussion by presenting the new Forest Plan and its recommendations for adding 27,000 acres of wilderness to the existing 59,000 acres. One landowner asked Owens what the Forest Service would do should the borer appear in a wilderness. Her response: Nothing. She said only natural processes can occur in a wilderness, meaning no effort to slow or stop the spread would occur. An infestation in wilderness would be left to run its course until it spread into nearby private lands, at which time it would become a crisis. The original infestation would be left to fester and propagate.

Owens's response was not comforting to the assembled private landowners, some of whom own forestlands near the wildernesses in question.

The order of speakers became more awkward when staff from Senators Patrick Leahy's and Jim Jeffords's offices arrived to explain that the previous day, with Rep. Bernie Sanders, the delegation introduced legislation proposing 48,000 new acres of wilderness, which would extend wilderness protections to the boundaries of, or very near, private forest lands in at least eight towns. One prime example: extensions of the Breadloaf Wilderness to the edge of private land in Granville. Unfortunately the staffers were not pressed with the same hard questions as posed to Owens.

The emerald ash borer is one illustration among many why we may come to regret the hands-off mandates of additional wilderness. Asian Long-horned beetles would love our sugar maple trees, and the hemlock woolly adelgid is an insect poised to enter the National Forest from the south. Last year state agencies took fast and aggressive action to find and burn all hemlock plantings infested with adelgid sold from infected nursery stock unknowingly brought into the state, an effort greatly appreciated by private woodland owners.

Let's hope these resourceful, opportunistic invading insects don't spot a map of the Vermont Wilderness Bill of 2006 and find a comfortable, protected spot to settle in. Norman Arseneault is a private woodland owner in Granville.